

The Three Ages of Looking

Régis Debray

Translated by Eric Rauth

"I have suffered all my life from the unjust and absurd opinion that I am too literary to be a painter," said Gustave Moreau, the symbolist painter and Matisse's professor at the École des Beaux Arts, not long before his death. There is always a price to pay for attempting to break through disciplinary and generic divisions. Perhaps I will be considered too philosophical to take on the world of aesthetics with all its affective nuances and subtleties. But without concluding exactly this, the American reader may well wonder what a former revolutionary can possibly have to do with the philosophy of art. Such are the inertia of reputations, the compartmentalization of cultures, and the vicissitudes of translation.

Following Moreau's example from the last century, I must put up with the unjust and absurd opinion, at least outside of France, that a man who at age twenty-five followed Che Guevara and stood for his cause in Latin America is once and forever too political to be a connoisseur of art, a historian, or a novelist. This is by no means to renounce my youth. Allow me simply to remind the campus veterans and New Leftists of the 1960s that there is a life before and after causes célèbres. A philosopher I was before leaving for Bolivia in 1966, having studied with Althusser and Derrida at the École Normale; a philosopher I became again after getting out of prison in Camari in 1970.

*I am therefore all the more grateful to Tom Mitchell for making available to Critical Inquiry's readership chapter 8 of my book, *Vie et mort de l'image: Une Histoire du regard en Occident* (Paris, 1992). This work further advances a long-term project whose aim is to circumscribe a new disciplinary field that I have called mediology. Its premises were outlined in the form of a thesis that I presented*

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at the Sorbonne on 8 January 1994 to a committee composed of philosophers and historians, who granted it a right of theoretical citizenship by declaring me qualified to direct research. I take the term *mediology* to designate the study not of different forms of media *per se* but of the mediations through which an idea or visual representation [une imagerie] becomes a material force. It is a matter of substituting a problematic of transmission for the problematic of communication underlying semiology by avoiding the scholasticisms of code and signifier. *Mediology's objects are the ways and means of symbolic efficacy*. In previous works (notably *Cours de médiologie générale* [Paris, 1992]) I examined the details of the mediation and transmission of the Word. After "the power of ideas," which the Marxist concept of ideology does not permit us to understand or even to take into account, *Vie et mort de l'image* examines iconic efficacy, not the meaning but the power of images—what effects of amazement, imposition, or captivation the image has developed as a result of the techniques that have produced them and the cultural systems through which we perceive them.

There is no image in itself. Its status and effects have varied according to revolutions of technology and collective beliefs. And it is the logic of this evolution that I have sought to present with broad brushstrokes in an offhand manner—from the earliest cave paintings to the computer screen—while attempting to reconcile material and spiritual approaches that have too often excluded one another. Compared to the sociology of art, which tends to neglect the technical history of processes for manufacturing images, and the various phenomenologies of artistic perception, which slight the religious and cultural contexts of the practice of looking, the originality of the mediological approach, if it can be granted, consists of connecting more precisely material devices and mental abilities, in short, of multiplying the bridges between an elite philosophical aesthetic and a humble and prosaic material history.

This study of the invisible codes of the visible is mainly inscribed in the ongoing inquiry I began fifteen years ago with *Le Pouvoir intellectuel en France* ([Paris, 1979]; trans. David Macey, under the title *Teachers, Writers, Celebrities: The Intellectuals of Modern France* [London, 1981]). This historical monograph dealt with the evolution within the French framework of the social powers of the symbolic mediator in his changing role from medieval cleric to contemporary intellectual. It was hence a long path that led me next (following Gödel's axiom of incompleteness) to examine the religious structure of the collective in my *Critique de la*

Régis Debray's most recent works include *Critique de la raison politique ou l'inconscient religieux* (1981), *Cours de médiologie générale* (1992), *Manifestes médiologiques* (1994), and *L'Œil naïf* (1994). **Eric Rauth** is participating as a faculty fellow in the Center for Critical Inquiry at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. He translated Régis Debray's *Manifestes médiologiques* (1995) and is currently working on a historical and mediological study of the novels of Verne and Conrad entitled *Living in the Flicker*.

raison politique (Paris, 1981). From that point I have at last come back from mediation in its logical and ageless necessity (we will always need interpreters because the transcendence of meaning cannot be bypassed) to the media, or to contemporary procedures and techniques of influence.

If in the final analysis political thought amounts to asking how one human being can act upon another without physical coercion to persuade him, for example, to obey the law, to get himself killed in a war, or to pay taxes, it necessarily runs into the question of belief. Following Hobbes, Churchill used to observe that governing was a matter of making people believe. Mediology studies the technologies of making-believe. People are governed not only by words but also by images. So to those who might reasonably ask what link there is between my former life as an intellectual engagé and my present life as researcher without other concern than the search for truth, this guiding thread will serve as my response.

In order not to go into too much detail, I have made three divisions, let us call them, rather, periods, each with its own recognizably distinct character, running from the time of the Renaissance of the arts up to our own time; each one is distinguished from the others by a highly pronounced difference.

—VASARI, *Lives of the Artists*

Three mediological cesuras of civilization—writing, printing, and audio-visuality—separate the time of the image into three distinct continents: the idol, art, and the visual. Each has its own laws. Confusing them causes useless pains.

Bearings

Here we will be concerned only with chronology, the most basic but also necessary of analytical procedures.

The ball and chain of the historian, all periodization is an even greater burden to the aesthete. What good will it do to plough the sea? asks the amateur accustomed to drifting on a boundless ocean of beauties, content to do without a compass. However, the articulation of the duration of history in conventional periods—antiquity, the Middle Ages, modernity—is almost as old as the discipline of history itself. Why would the history of images be exempt from this rule? Yet to be limited to inflecting the time of art into “ancient,” “medieval,” “classical,” “modern,” and “contemporary” in imitation of convenient scholarly divisions does not seem particularly rigorous. The history of the eye does not coincide with institutional, economic, or military history. It has a claim, if only in the West, to its own, more radical temporality.

One cannot escape the continuist confusion in which the official history of art is immersed without finding alternate means—conceptual thus, in the first place, terminological ones. For a different function, so

too a different appellation. An image that does not support the same practice cannot bear the same name. Just as primitive imagery cannot be properly understood without taking off the spectacles of art, the language of the aesthete must be forgotten in order to discover the originality of the visual.

To each his own vocabulary, provided that he defines his terms. This is what my book *Cours de médiologie générale* attempted with its detailed characterization of the three “mediaspheres.” Can the scansion it provides for the course of evolution of *Homo sapiens*’s techniques of transmission also now shed light on the historical trajectory of its images? The way seems open if we distinguish at the outset three pivotal stages.

To the *logosphere* would correspond the era of idols in the broadest sense (from the Greek *eidolon*, image). It extends from the invention of writing to that of printing. To the *graphosphere*, the era of art, which extends from the time of the printing press to that of color television (relevant differently, as we shall see, from photography or film). To the *videosphere*, the era of the *visual* (according to the term proposed by Serge Daney). We are there.

Each of these eras delineates an environment of life and thought with strong internal connections, an ecosystem of vision and thus a certain horizon of visual expectation (which does not expect the same thing from a Pantocrator, a self-portrait, and a short video spot). We have already seen (in *Cours de médiologie générale*) how no mediasphere entirely supplants the other and how they become superimposed upon and interwoven with one another. These dominances are relayed by successive hegemonies; and rather than as clean breaks, their borders ought to be conceptualized in the old way, as they were before the existence of nation-states: buffer zones, fringe areas of contact, broad chronological stages that yesterday embraced centuries and today only decades. Just as the innovation of printing did not erase from our culture medieval proverbs and common dicta, those mnemonic devices proper to oral societies, television does not prevent us from going to the Louvre (quite the contrary). Nor is this museum’s department of Egyptian antiquities closed off to eyes trained by the movie screen. It is worth repeating that nothing occurs after the cesura that could not already be found before it. If this were not the case, developments on either side could not be linked together, each germinating within its predecessor. Yet not at the same place or with the same intensity.

I stress this linkage in order to forestall a current objection. It is a matter of fact that whoever studies modes of looking exclusively from the viewpoint of the history of visible forms must take note of the constancy of power and money as the twin protectors of art since earliest antiquity. *Nihil novi sub sole*? The scholar of art in its economic context will thus be quick to demonstrate how the seeds of Andy Warhol’s “factory” lay dormant in the studio of Rembrandt (skillful public relations manager and

promoter that he was, who loved painting, freedom, and money); or how a precedent for the studio of the master had already existed in the Hellenistic *officium* of the artisan, where Alexander felt obliged to offer the services of his mistress to Apelles. The scholar attuned to such echoes will show how the subtleties of the contract binding Sixtus IV to Raphael were every bit as complex as those between the state-owned Renault company and Dubuffet; how corporate patronage of the arts is no less self-seeking and yet in ways more salutary than that of Gaius Cilnius Maecenas in the time of Augustus; how in magnificence American philanthropical grant money rivals the Ptolemies of Alexandria; how, in sum, the art market is as old as art itself (in fact precedes the very concept of art), and how without the care given to advertising by the generous donors or sponsors of the Greek polis (to say nothing of Lorenzo the Magnificent or Francis I) Athens and Delphi would have remained scrubby hilled backwaters. Our own age cannot escape from the wisdom of nations. For us—given that a manufacturer of images seemed bound to be the purveyor of glory for the powers that be in the Catholic universe and during the preceding fifteen hundred years—the question is whether it was the same *type* of individual that labored successively to the greater glory of Christ, his city, the prince, the great bourgeois collector, the Olivetti foundation, or his own person with the same effects of presence and power.

These moments ought to be linked, then, in a sort of backwards tracking shot, given that they are grounded in one and the same gradual advance forward that combines historical acceleration with geographical dilation.

Abbreviation of ideal time: the *idol* is the image of frozen time, a swoon of eternity, a vertical cross section of the infinite standing-still of the divine. *Art* is slow but already shows its figures in movement. In our own age the *visual* is in constant rotation, pure rhythm, haunted by speed.

Enlargement of the spaces of circulation: the *idol* is *autochthonous*, heavily vernacular, rooted in an ethnic soil. *Art* is *Western*, with something of the rustic about it but at the same time fit to circulate and prone to travel (Dürer in Italy, Leonardo in France, and so on). The *visual* is *world-wide* [*mondiovision*], conceived at the moment of its manufacturing for planetary diffusion.

Each age has its mother tongue. The *idol* was expounded in Greek, art in Italian, the *visual* in American. Theology, aesthetics, economy: each reflected in the other.

Unlike the two periods that frame it, that of art seems immediately to belong to the West. But the latter is not a synchronous block; Occidental societies did not enter into the era of art all at once. Italy was first, before Holland, which followed it in the seventeenth century, before France,

which fully staked its claims only in the eighteenth with the social and critical panoply of taste. And only somewhat belatedly and retroactively did Germany give this era its *philosophical* pedigree, beginning with the neologism *aesthetics* (Baumgarten publishing his *Aesthetica* in 1750). The Slavic and Greco-Slavic world has for a long time remained, perhaps even into our own day, in the era of icons that has been prolonged and recast by the Orthodox Church and its theology. Even in France, at a moment when Picasso's drawing of Joseph Stalin after the Red czar's death scandalized the Communist movement (1953), one witnessed via Moscow a resurgence of the Byzantine sacred, if not the backfire of the era of the idol at the twilight of the era of art. The anachronism is explicable in terms of a reactivation of Orthodox, preartistic, or prehumanistic postures by the Communist autocracy.

A Panoramic Schema

The long trajectory of the image indicates a trend toward lowering its output of energy. In terms of collective mentality, the period of the idol ensures the transition from the *magical to the religious*. It is a lengthy journey during which the appearance of organized Christianity creates no radical disruption—a paradox I shall have to account for. The new faith weds the visual schemas of antiquity and blends into them (as it does with its political structures of authority) while at the same time scorning them in theory. In its workmanship and symbolics the paleo-Christian image is neopagan, indeed, archeo-Roman.

Art secures the transition from the *theological to the historical* or, if you prefer, from the divine to the human as a center of reference. The visual makes possible a further transition from the unity of personhood to the global environment, or from being to milieu. In Lévi-Strauss's vocabulary, we would say that the visual is an "encoded" painting taking as its raw material the debris of prior myths; art a "mythic" painting (composed of a finite number of collective narratives); and idol-worship a "message" painting (in the most physical sense of the term). From theocracy to "androcracy" to technocracy: each era is a hierarchical organizing or restructuring of the city and of the prestige of its image manufacturers. Thus a different type of charisma originates from on high (piety), from within (geniality), or from without (advertising). The idol is solemn, art serious, the visual ironic. And so a different disposition of reception is cultivated depending on whether it is toward an *intercession* (era one), an *illusion* (era two), or an *experimentation* (era three). It is like a progressive relaxation of the spectator. Like a gradual disengagement of the manufacturers. Expected as they are at first to celebrate and edify, then to observe and invent, and finally to demystify and divert. Tragic, the *idol* is deifying; heroic, the *oeuvre* is edifying; mediative, *research* is merely interesting. The

first aims to reflect *eternity*, the second to gain *immortality*, the third to be an *event*. From this arise as well three temporal levels internal to the image-manufacturing process: the time of *repetition* (via the canon or archetype); the time of *tradition* (via the model and instruction); the time of *innovation* (via rupture or scandal). The first of these temporalities suits an *object of worship*; the second an *object of delectation*; the third an *object of astonishment* or distraction.

In era one, the idol is not of aesthetic but rather of religious interest, with directly political stakes. It is a matter of *belief*. In era two, art conquers its autonomy vis-à-vis religion while remaining subordinate to political power, since its legitimacy turns on questions of *taste*. In era three, the economic sphere determines both value and distribution; it is now a matter of *buying power*. As an *amateur* of Christian culture, I can even today, without leaving the small compass of Europe, gain access to these three continents of the image simply by changing my viaticum: missal, *guide bleu*, and checkbook.

To each of the stages belongs its own type of professional organization. For the *ymagiers*, the *guild*; for artists, the *academy*; for the advertising executive, the *network*. The *artisan* has no autonomous workplace (except perhaps the *officium* at Rome). The scriptorium of the illuminator of manuscripts depends on the convent or university; the decorator works in fresco directly within the church or palace. The *artist* labors in his own *atelier*, *taller*, or *bottega*. The *captain of industry* remains in his *factory*, linked by fax and computer to the clientele. "Being good in business is the most fascinating kind of art."¹ Of the first operator what was required was *fidelity*—the work of replication—of the second, *inspiration*—the work of creation. Now we expect the third to give evidence of *initiative*—the work of *diffusion*. This person's margin for maneuver is much greater; for beyond our not necessarily expecting a ponderous object or any production by nature cumbersome from him, he benefits from the general dematerialization of the media. The image maker carved or daubed colors on stone or wood; the artist ordinarily carried out his task on a canvas stretched on a frame; but the *visual* is produced without touching it by interposing electrons.

For each *métier*, a different emblem. The *nimbus* and *ray of light* for the man of the idol, subservient to the twin teachings of theology and grace. The mirror and the compass for the Renaissance maestro, dependent as he is on optics and geometry, camera obscura and perspective. "The mirror is the master of painters."² Scissors and paste (or computer cut and paste) for the "pro" of the visual, who must not only cite, paste, displace, divert, retrieve, and glamorize but also do it quickly, like every-

1. Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)* (New York, 1975), p. 92.

2. Leonardo da Vinci, *Leonardo on Painting*, trans. Martin Kemp and Margaret Walker, ed. Kemp (New Haven, Conn., 1989), p. 202.

ATTRIBUTES OF THE IMAGE	IN THE LOGOSPHERE (after writing)	IN THE GRAPHOSPHERE (after printing)	IN THE VIDEOSPHERE (after the audiovisual)
	REGIME OF THE IDOL	REGIME OF ART	REGIME OF THE VISUAL
PRINCIPLE OF ITS EFFICACY (OR RELATION TO BEING)	PRESENCE (transcendent) The image sees	REPRESENTATION (illusory) The image is seen	SIMULATION (numerical) The image is viewed
MODE OF EXISTENCE	LIVING The image is a being	PHYSICAL The image is a thing	VIRTUAL The image is a perception
CRUCIAL REFERENT (SOURCE OF AUTHORITY)	THE SUPERNATURAL (God)	THE REAL (Nature)	THE PERFORMER (The Machine)
SOURCE OF LIGHT	SPIRITUAL (from within)	SOLAR (from without)	ELECTRIC (from within)
PURPOSE AND EXPECTATION	PROTECTION (and salvation) The image captures	DELECTION (and prestige) The image captivates	INFORMATION (and game-playing) The image is captured
HISTORICAL CONTEXT	From the MAGICAL to the RELIGIOUS (Cyclical Time)	From the RELIGIOUS to the HISTORICAL (Linear Time)	From the HISTORICAL to the TECHNICAL (Punctual Time)
DEONTOLOGY	EXTERNAL (theological & political orientation)	INTERNAL (autonomous administration)	AMBIENT (Techno-economic management)
IDEAL & NORM OF WORK	"I CELEBRATE" (a force) Modeled on Scripture (Canon)	"I CREATE" (a work) Modeled on antiquity (Model)	"I PRODUCE" (an event) Modeled on the Ego (Fashion)
TEMPORAL HORIZON (& MEDIUM)	ETERNITY (repetition) Hardness (stone, wood)	IMMORTALITY (tradition) Softness (canvas)	THE PRESENT (innovation) Immateriality (screen)

MODE OF ATTRIBUTION	COLLECTIVE=ANONYMOUS (from sorcerer to artisan)	INDIVIDUAL=SIGNATURE (from artist to genius)	SPECTACULAR=LABEL, LOGO, BRAND NAME (from entrepreneur to enterprise)
ORGANIZATION OF LABOR	From CLERISY to GUILD	From ACADEMY to SCHOOL	From NETWORK to PROFESSION
OBJECT OF WORSHIP	THE SAINT (I protect you)	BEAUTY (I am pleasing)	NOVELTY (I surprise you)
GOVERNMENTAL STRUCTURE	1) CURIAL=The Emperor 2) ECCLESIASTICAL=Monasteries & Cathedrals 3) SEIGNORIAL=The Palace	1) MONARCHICAL=The Academy (1500–1750) 2) BOURGEOISIE=Salon + Criticism + Gallery (to 1968)	MEDIA/MUSEUM/MARKET (for plastic arts) PUBLICITY (audiovisual)
CONTINENT OF ORIGIN & CITY OF TRANSMISSION	ASIA-BYZANTINUM (between antiquity and Christianity)	EUROPE-FLORENCE (between Christianity and modernity)	AMERICA-NEW YORK (between modern and postmodern)
MODE OF ACCUMULATION	PUBLIC: The treasury	INDIVIDUAL: The collection	PRIVATE/PUBLIC: Reproduction
AURA	CHARISMATIC (anima)	PATHETIC (animus)	LUDIC (animation)
PATHOLOGICAL TENDENCY	PARANOIA	OBSESSION	SCHIZOPHRENIA
AIM OF THE GAZE	ACROSS THE IMAGE Clairvoyance conveys	MORE THAN THE IMAGE Vision contemplates	ONLY THE IMAGE Viewing controls
MUTUAL RELATIONS	INTOLERANCE (Religious)	RIVALRY (Personal)	COMPETITION (Economic)

one else does, and hence standardize format and technique as much as possible. "Why do people think artists are special? It's just another job."³

Thus the artificial image would have passed through three different modes of being in the Western brain—*presence* (the saint present through his effigy); *representation*; and *simulation* (in the scientific sense), while the figure perceived exercised its intermediary function from three successive, inclusive perspectives—the *supernatural*, the *natural*, and the *virtual*. These suggest three affective postures: the idol summons *fear*; art, *love*; and the visual, *interest*. The first is subordinated to the *archetype*, the second is ordered by the *prototype*; the third orders its own *stereotypes*. I have not stated here the metaphysical and psychological attributes of an eternal eye but rather different intellectual and social universes. Each age of the image corresponds to a qualitative structuration of the life-world. Tell me what you see and I will tell you why you live and what you think.

Index, Icon, Symbol

Conceptually, the succession of the eras tallies in part with the classification established by the American logician C. S. Peirce that distinguished between the *index*, the *icon*, and the *symbol* in their relation to the object. Let us recall, while simplifying them to an extreme, these three ways of making signs to one's fellow beings. The *index* is a fragment of the object or contiguous with it in a causal way, a part of the whole or taken as the whole. A relic is an index in this sense: the thighbone of the saint in a reliquary or shrine *is* the saint. So too the footprint in the sand, or the smoke of a distant fire. In quite the opposite way, the *icon* resembles the thing without being *of* it; it is not arbitrary but motivated by an identity of proportion or of form. One recognizes the saint by his portrait, but the portrait adds to the world of saintliness; it was not given with the saint. It is a work. Now the *symbol* does not have an analogical but simply a conventional relation to the thing: it is arbitrary in relation to the thing and is deciphered with the help of a code. Hence the relation between the word *blue* and the color blue. These contemporary distinctions, which are quite useful for our purposes, have the single fault of infringing on an older and more accredited classification. The Greek Orthodox icon, for example, is indexical [*indicielle*] by virtue of its miraculous or thaumaturgical properties (beggars in Russia hung icons from their necks like amulets). The primacy of statuary over painting for the ancients expresses their proximity to the index, let us say, to the physics of bodies. Volume, relief, three dimensions—this was crude casting and shading. At the opposite extreme, the effacement of statuary in modern

3. Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol (From A to B and Back Again)*, p. 178.

sculpture would attest to a will to affiliate oneself with the pure, more abstract order of the symbolic.

The *image as index* fascinates. It almost appeals to the touch. It has a magical value. The *image as icon* inspires only pleasure. It has an artistic value. The *image as symbol* requires an act of distancing. Its value is *sociological*, like a sign of status or a mark of belonging. The first staggers [*sidère*]. The second considers itself [*se considère*]. Only the third is considerable because considered in and for itself.

The regime of the idol: the beyond of the visible is its norm and its reason for being. The image, which owes to this beyond all of its *aura*, gives glory to what surpasses it. The regime of art: the beyond of representation is the natural world. To each its *aura*; the glory is shared. The regime of the visual: the image becomes its own referent. All glory is its own.

These three classes of images do not designate final natures of objects but rather types of their appropriation by the gaze [*le regard*]. If we can only half jokingly make "moments" of them in the Hegelian sense, it should not be forgotten that we are contemporaries of all three together; we carry them in our genetic memory. If the bridges between animal and human behavior—"between the coxcomb and the plumed helmet, the cock's spur and the saber, the low bows of pigeons and the country dance" (Leroi-Gourhan)—have not been burned, even less so have they between yesterday's image and today's. Everyday life engages and disengages with the different stages of the visible, and we change our vantage point as we change gears. Coming from the deepest layers of the individual psyche and history of the species, the idol perhaps solicits us the most imperiously (because most unconsciously). In much the same way that modern art, like the Platonic soul, has its former life in Egypt and Assyria, our eye is a later version of the great originary repression of hunting magic. Because we have the same brain and carcass as Neanderthal people, they understand us better than we understand them. They still live and breathe in us even if their intellect escapes us. The framed photo of the president of the republic in the bureaucrat's office plays an analogous role to the medallion of Isis in the hypostyle of the temple at Edfu, a role that is much more than descriptive or decorative. Isis is there, as the president is there, in person. They look upon and oversee all that is done in their presence. They keep those standing beneath or next to them, whether priests or functionaries, from saying or doing just anything. These images mark a territory and symbolically do violence to those who stand within it, while authorizing them to visit that symbolic violence on their subordinates. To extract oneself from the tutelage of Isis or the president requires removing, mutilating, or turning their figurative representations to the wall, responding to symbolic ascendancy with material violence. This is what Coptic Christians in Upper Egypt did by bludgeoning the bas-reliefs of Egyptian pagan deities (especially

eyes, hands, feet, and vital organs) when it came time to transform temples into churches. This is what our officials do in the more courteous fashion authorized in our time by the portability of official photographs when changing the photos hanging on the wall after each presidential election.

Not only do our three ages straddle one another, but it is also a constant that the last reactivates the ghost of the first. The spell from upstream: in the species and each individual, telepathic communication (through the body, facial expressions, gestures) preceded symbolic communication (as the immediate precedes the mediate, the affect the concept, and the index the symbol). No form of the gaze is superior to the other because it is subsequent to it, and yet less exclusive. The idol is not the degree zero of the image but its superlative form. From this our pangs of collective nostalgia. What we recognize as the *retrograde character of progress* is no less flagrant in the life of forms than in that of societies. The long “decadence of illiteracy” sparks a compensatory return of the primitive repressed, as we have recently seen in painting with collage, *frottage*, and *grattage*; in automatism, drip painting, body art; in graffiti art, doodling, ejaculations. Greco-Roman art takes us from the index to the icon. Modern art, from the icon to the symbol. In the era of the visual, the loop of contemporary art reverses itself and turns away from everything symbolic in a desperate quest for the index: muddy matter, tar, sand, chalk, and charcoal. After Kandinsky, Dubuffet and his *Texturologies*; after Calder, Ségal and his nudes in almost perfect facsimile (like the wax models of Roman magistrates and Renaissance kings). Flesh rediscovered.

In a universe of action at a distance and abstract models, the physical pleasure of the index assures an almost medical reequilibration of our prosthetic bodies—through a trip upstream to the purely sentient, tactile, almost olfactory. The free association of images is social therapy as necessary as games are in a society without humor. Inversion of economic rationality, the utilitarian’s alibi. As Baudrillard and Bognoux have put it, modern art whitewashes capital and calculation. It is not the fool of the king but of the businessman. Functional totality is redeemed—at a high price—by the sumptuary, gratuitous, and festive wastefulness of an art market, which consequently would be nothing but arbitrary and “crazy” to the highest degree. The contemporary art fair or the auctions at Sotheby’s are at once the banker’s Sunday and the intellectual’s sensuality, the unreason of reasoners and the passion of apathetics. Not so much a supplement of the soul as a complement of the *body*.

We have seen the perils of the contemporary return to the physical values of the elementary and the primordial (think, for example, of Beuys’s compositions in fat and felt). Deprived of the symbolic vitality that made sacred images radiant, neoprimitivism looks to square the circle: contact without community. No raw body can speak by itself; the solil-

oquy in the blink of an eye from the index in its pure state, however humorous or mutinous it takes itself to be, resembles the silence of death.

Writing in the Beginning

Until the very recent emergence (four thousand years ago) of processes for the linear notation of sound, the image took the place of writing. At once cosmic and intellectual, it was a highly ritualized symbolism, undoubtedly coupled with verbal utterances. This period extends from the first semantic drawings on fragments of bone to pictograms and mythograms (radiant, pluridimensional constructions). Inventing the line [*le trait*] thus remains secondary to producing information (useful recollection, accounting enumeration, technical directions). Let us recall the findings of paleontology: when the transmission of meaning can no longer be effected through gestures and facial expressions, it has a choice between phonation and the written form (this is the face-hand couple). *Homo sapiens* articulates sounds and draws lines, two doubtlessly complementary operations. They are no longer signals, as they are with animals, but signs. Phonetic writing is not a creation of the brain *ex nihilo*, it arises from the ambiguity of *graphisme* itself,⁴ which accounts for the double meaning of the Greek verb *graphein*, to draw *and* to write, or again for the Mexican *tlacuilo*, a term that in Nahuatl meant both painter and scribe. On the other hand, when writing appeared it took up the lion's share of utilitarian communication; it relieved the image, which from that time became available for representational and expressive functions, became open to the likeness. To roughly summarize, the image is the mother of the sign, but the birth of the sign of writing allows the image to live its adult life fully, separate from the word and disburdened of its more trivial tasks of communication.

Painting in the Paleolithic period arose out of a repertory of signifying elements whose code we no longer possess; this first mediological decoupling at the threshold of the logosphere marks the birth of our plastic arts. If the first traces of writing appear in the middle of the fourth millennium in Mesopotamia, the first consonantal alphabets (Phoenician) date from around 1300 B.C. and the vocalic alphabet (Greek) from about the seventh century B.C. Yet from the eleventh through the eighth century Greece knows neither writing nor representational figuration. Emerging from this tunnel it discovers both at the same time. All this thus comes about as though the abstraction of the written symbol set free the plastic function of the image, which both competes with and complements the linguistic tool.

4. I have retained the French *graphisme* here because it signifies graphics or the graphic arts as well as handwriting or script.—TRANS.

The demonstration *a contrario* is provided by the status of figures in oral civilizations. Their images fill the role of signs. These semaphores do not represent but rather indicate, schematize, simplify, concentrate. Consider the pre-Columbian culture of Mexico, almost completely without writing, in which signification and communication took place through images, with the codices or pictograms lending support to oral recitations. Consider African plastic art or the more decorative Oceanian. Far from imitating appearances, the figurative works of “primitive” peoples are tools of meaning. They are less to be contemplated than deciphered. In a world without written archives, all implements act as aids to memory, from the calabash flask to the goatherd’s wooden clogs. The aesthetic intention here cannot be separated from the magical and ideological intention. Children learn to fashion such objects as we learn to read and write. It is indeed among peoples without writing that we can speak most strictly of plastic language. Here the code devours the form; and the general, the particular, even if we can always turn these narrowly controlled and in a certain sense conformist, utilitarian objects to aesthetic ends, our own especially. The paradox is that the refusal of all descriptive naturalism—the pure play of surfaces and lines—renders these images more familiar to us. Their abstraction seems like the height of style to us, when as conformist, interchangeable, ritualized products regulated by collective life, they are in fact the negation of style. Those forms of severe intellectualism that comprise the sculptures in wood of a Fang or a Baoubé harmonize with our own, which finds itself reflected there with pleasure. We see then an intellectualism of exhaustion or the end of a cycle—our own—revived through an intellectualism of necessity—theirs—where it hopes to renew itself.

Figure of eternity, the idol is conservative.⁵ Whether it obeys theological canons as the Byzantine icon does or social rituals as African sculpture does, it fears innovation; the constraints of efficaciousness make it conformist. Whereas the artist constantly renews and reinvents his inheritance, the maker of idols is not a creator. He is a producer without a market; his client is his master, and an interiorized social imperative takes the place of unconscious desire. He has nothing to discover; everything has already been found. Here imagery circulates in a closed system that is as much formal as mythological, drawing on limited themes from a repertoire that is fixed in advance. A minutely regulated collective public service intended for a community and in a certain sense assured by it would have to our eyes the aspect of official art proper to all art that is religious in the strong sense, if the notions of official or its opposite, artistic freedom, could make any sense in a universe that does not distinguish between the order of the cosmos and that of human beings.

5. See *L'Idolâtrie* (Paris, 1990).

The Era of Idols

The West's ethics are Judeo-Christian. The West's images are Helleno-Christian (Roman Catholic theology of the image practically finesses the Old Testament away). It is through Greek and not Latin that Christianity rescued representational imagery from the long sleep of monotheism and this well before the Orthodox schism. In the acts of the Councils, the Greek *eikon* was translated by the Latin *imago*. And *eikon* was derived from *eidolon*, from the same root, *eidos*, idea. The icon is not a portrait that resembles but a divine image, both theophanic and liturgical, whose value resides not in its visible form proper but in the deifying character of its vision, that is, in its effect.⁶ But why prefer *idol* to *icon*? Because the older term has wider import. It includes the Christian divine without being reduced to it. Historically, *idol* in the more limited Greek sense designated a cylindrical or tetragonal pedestal, or the pre-Hellenic statuary which preceded that known as Daedalian. But in the broader sense we include under this term the set of images that are immediately efficacious (at least for worshipers immersed in a certain tradition of faith) in allowing the gaze to pass beyond the visible materiality of the object.

The age of idols that Western history must accept as its own thus knows nothing of the break between pagan and Christian worlds. It is the originary socle of images, the buried base of the pyramid whose apex, art, has only recently emerged. What paleontology is to the history of societies or the Pacific is to the Tuvalu islands, imagery's unchanging millennia are to the brief span of time called the history of art. The primordial mantle could be spread from the first Aurignacian representations to the dawn of the quattrocento if the cesura of writing did not have to be taken into account here. The appearance of writing in properly historical cultures that have kept written records—the early dynastic period in Egypt and the first Mesopotamian dynasties—shortens (from thirty thousand to three thousand years) the magicoreligious period of the carved and painted idol.

The mediologist does not have the same criterion as the historian. In ontological value, he or she does not see fundamental cesuras between Luxor, the Parthenon, and the cathedrals. Romanesque statues inlaid with gold and precious stones like the Majesté de Sainte-Foy sparkled just as brightly as the chryselephantine statues in gold and ivory of archaic Greece. The eye of a several-thousand-years-ago visitor could have surveyed without much surprise the same medley of colors covering these marbles and alabasters with a warm mantle of life unrelated to the cold whiteness with which the present has vested them. These idols had the rosininess and luster of flesh because they were in effect acting, speaking

6. See Egon Sendler, *L'Idône, image de l'invisible* (Paris, 1981).

beings. The sight of them made an immediate appeal to the left side of the brain. The practices of looking do not follow our Christian calendar. They straddle the beginning of the Christian era as they do the Middle Ages (a term challenged for that matter by eminent historians—Jacques Le Goff, for example, or, in the case of Italy, Armando Saporì). We know that following the considerable gain of the *codex* over the *volumen*, the practices of reading (acoustic, psalmodized, semipublic) and textual culture do not know any further significant change between early antiquity and the beginning of the Renaissance. Could one not say the same of visual culture and align the pagan image with the Christian image, which was supposed to be its adversary and even, at the time, its strict antithesis?

On first inspection this may not be apparent. The polychromatic, polytheistic *eidolon* is turned toward the visible and its splendor; the Byzantine *eikon*, less dazzling and more severe, looks inward. These two kinds of investment in the visible by the invisible can and should be considered opposites; their two modes of divinity made present through figuration are incompatible. The pagan god is substantially visible and present in its essence in the idol of antiquity; the Christian God is substantially invisible and not present in the icon (as the body of Christ is in the host). The Church fathers justified wars of extermination against idolaters with this distinction between immediate presence and mediated representation. But the difference between the permitted icon and the prohibited idol has to do not with the image itself but with the cult devoted to it. Savages and idiots adore a piece of wood for itself rather than practice the ascent to the model, the *translatio ad prototypum*, whereas the good Christian does not confuse *dulia* with *latría*. These differences are real enough for the era of the idols to be divided into three distinct periods—archaic, classical, and Christian—but not enough to break up the general accolade. Between the myth of Isis, of which Apuleius speaks—“enjoying the inexpressible pleasure given over by the simulacrum of divinity,” since he beholds not the statue but the goddess herself—⁷ and Teresa of Avila in ecstasy before an image of the flagellated Christ at the Carmelite Convent of the Incarnation, there is no major break in the psychology of the gaze, whatever the theologians may say about it. In both cases the divine being reveals itself directly and in person through its image. Late antiquity and primitive Christianity furthermore have in common the official acknowledgement of the miraculous or “acheiropoietic” [*acheiropoiète*] image not made by the hand of man. In antiquity it fell from the sky. Under Christianity it comes from its origins. It is the Holy Face of Laon, the Sacred Mandilion of Edessa, just as, much later, it is the Holy Shroud of Turin. Their common feature: the living imprint of the living God exclusive of any artistic workmanship. Thus is the facsimile of

7. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*, trans. and ed. J. Arthur Hanson, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 2:342; trans. mod.

the Holy Face, the only extant imprint of the face of Christ before the Passion, *made flesh* by the Mandilion according to the legend. ("King Abgar of Edessa then sent a painter so that he might make a portrait of the Lord. Of such a task he was incapable because of the dazzling splendor of His face. And so the Lord himself placed a cloth upon his divine and life-giving face and imprinted his own likeness upon it.") The two periods also have in common the independence of the sacred image in relation to the gaze. The image does not have to be *seen* in order to act. Even if the Gorgon turns only those who look at her to stone, the creatures of Daedalus, archaic statues, lead their lives behind our backs. Under the regime of the idol, *the practical experience of the image is not contemplative*, and perception is not a criterion. The power of the image lies not in our viewing of it but in its presence. The illumination in a closed manuscript or the sacramentary hidden in a church watch over the gathered faithful from afar. A Greek Orthodox worshiper prays to his icon with eyes shut because he carries the icon of Christ within him. The cult of relics in antiquity was translated into the Christian cult of the miraculous statue and of saints' relics. The blood of the martyr purifies through simple contact. Proximity alone has a propitiatory, prophylactic, or sanctifying power. A funerary chamber becomes a chapel through the presence of relics. Hence the "therapy through space" (Dupront) of the pilgrimage and the burial *ad sanctos*, close to the body-indexes that are capable of freeing the faithful from the devil. The repose of the dead (who, Gregory of Nazianzus assures us, continue to feel and suffer)—and thus the tranquillity of the living—depends on the location of their sepulcher. The faithful leave "holy water, the crucifix, holy books, hosts, and relics" in tombs.⁸ If this is not magic, what is?

In short, the two periods resemble one another in this: the visible image is directly referred to the invisible and *is only valuable as a relay*. Just as in the city of the two swords the spiritual prevails over the temporal, so in the city of idols the flesh of the image is worth less than the Word it clothes. It is the text of Holy Scripture that legitimates the illumination of the missal, which has no existence of its own. Finally, let us not forget that the *idol* of the theologian is the *icon* of a rival religion (just as the ideology of the publicist is the idea of his adversary). The idol is the image of a god who does not exist. But who decides that he does not? True or false, what is important is that within or beyond figuration there is divinity, that is, power. Such is the criterion for grouping images within a single

8. Yvette Duval, *Auprès des Saints, corps et âme: L'Inhumation ad sanctos dans la chrétienté d'Orient et d'Occident du IIIe au VIIe siècle* (Paris, 1988). These funerary practices did not take account of some recommendations made by Saint Augustine. He observes that since the resurrection does not depend on the material preservation of bodies, "the faithful lose nothing by being deprived of a sepulcher, as the unfaithful gain nothing by being given them" (Augustine, *De Cura pro portuis gerenda ad Paulinum*, in bk. 6 of *Opera Omnia*, vol. 40 of *Patrologiae: Cursus Completus*, ed. J.-P. Migne [Paris, 1887], p. 600).

era: *an art image achieves its effects by means of metaphor. An idol has its effect in reality and by nature.*

The strictly Christian phase of the era of the idol takes us from Ravenna to Siena. It is organized on the Byzantine model, thus reflecting Eastern Christianity's hegemony over its Western pendant. As the direct heir of the Roman Empire, site of the synthesis of imperial and Christological iconographies, Byzantium served as the pivot and relay between a Hellenistic East and a Gothic West. Under the influence of Byzantium, Charlemagne, a moderate iconodule, remained a golden-mean partisan of the image: it must be neither shattered nor adored. Byzantium assured the filiation between the magical beliefs of the pagan world and the theology of the image derived from the Incarnation, just as, through the imperial model, it did between the city of antiquity and the Ottonian court. It was from Byzantium that Benedictine monks borrowed the art of illuminating manuscripts, and Italian towns breathed the air of antiquity by means of its political refugees following the capture of Constantinople by the Crusaders (1204–6). These crucial importers brought Plato to humanists like Marsilio Ficino, his Florentine translator. Byzantium connects the Christian of A.D. 1000 to the pagan of one thousand years earlier. To this day, Russian icons issuing from this Byzantine tradition retain for the naive popular gaze the same virtues as miraculous Greek xoana.

The Era of Art

Art is indeed a product of human freedom, but not simply in the sense that Kant means it when he says that the labor of bees is not a work of art but an effect of nature (honeycombs not being constructed in accordance with an end). The freedom to which art attests is not that of an intention in relation to an instinct but rather that of the creature vis-à-vis the creator.

The freedom of human beings in *general* (those nonbees) has no history other than a zoological one; the freedom of artists in particular belongs entirely to history because it was wrested from theology by humanism. It is a liberation. That is why art is not a characteristic of the species but of civilization.

The artistic emerges when the work of art discovers in itself its reason for being. When pleasure (aesthetic) no longer pays tribute to control (religious). Practically and prosaically speaking, when the maker of images in lieu of the commissioner of images takes initiative for them.⁹ The professionalization of the artist (who comes from the artisan as the lay

9. See Francis Haskell, *Patrons and Painters: A Study in the Relations between Italian Art and Society in the Age of the Baroque* (New Haven, Conn., 1980).

writer comes from the cleric) is not a criterion. Nor is the signature (artists' signatures have been found on the lintels of primitive synagogues and in the borders of Jewish mosaics in Palestine from as early as the first century). Its measure is *speaking, acting, fully assumed individuality*. Not the signature stamp or the flourish but speech. The artist is an artisan who says "me" or "I." Who reveals in his own person not the tricks of his trade or the rules of his apprenticeship but his role at the heart of society as a whole. In the final analysis he may *make* nothing with his hands—as is the case today with communication artists—provided that he *says* and *writes*, This is how *I see* the world.

The advent of art corresponds to the production of a *territory*, indissolubly ideal and concrete, civic and urban. It is born from the *meeting of a place and a discourse*. And what holds true for the notion of art holds as well for any *genre* of art—the theater, the novel, dance, film, and so on. An *ad hoc place* separate from temple or palace to be established on its own terms. As we say: a room in town, or a separate establishment. Site of safekeeping, of display, of visiting that activates the "patrimony effect" by stocking traces and competences: *glypto-*, *pinaco-*, *cinéma-*, *vidéo-* *thèque*. Concomitant with place, a *discursive space* distinct from mythology or theology with, in its wake, specialized mediators, critics, and commentators who address themselves to a public of connoisseurs according to endogenous criteria (juries, prize competitions, festivals, and so on). Respectability is domiciliation plus explication. The house makes the rules [*le toit fait loi*]; the cinematheque makes the cinephile.

One day the dramatic scenes that had been part of religious ceremony leave the chancel and take up residence in the church square. Backed by the cathedral but already in a public space, in the fourteenth century, the mystery play is born. Sacred drama later leaves the square with its makeshift scaffolding in the open air for a more permanent, sheltered dwelling constructed expressly for it; in the sixteenth century, theater is born. One day the cinematograph of the Lumière brothers moves on from its travelling stall and its room in the Grand Café, and Méliès invents the nickelodeon, an ancestor of our movie theaters, to show his film of Jules Verne's *Le Voyage dans la lune*. At the beginning of this century, cinema as an art form is born. One day, dance extricates itself from the opera house; the maître de ballet assumes the title of choreographer, writes on the meaning of life and art, and becomes the object of exegesis and scholarly studies. The public powers that be make him the director of an autonomous institution (a dance company or a center for the arts). And at the end of this century a major new art form is born. Emancipation is linked to the aptitude for reflecting upon oneself in one's own language, by one's own lights.

The transformation of images into aesthetic objects begins in the fifteenth century and ends in the nineteenth century between the appear-

ance of the personal collection of the humanist and the creation of the public museum, a collective and permanent site open to all (the British Museum in 1753, the Louvre in 1793, the Accademia of Venice in 1807).¹⁰

The museum is the temple of the muses, but we have seen that there were no muses in Greece for what we call the plastic arts. Galleries for paintings and stonework were private in the Roman and Hellenistic periods (most often they were collections of booty stored in the homes of consuls and victorious generals). The museum of Alexandria was known above all for its library. In the classical period, treasures were piled up in religious sanctuaries as votive offerings (our works of art) were in temples. Thus were medieval treasuries amassed in palaces to fulfill the duties owed to the king—war, lending, and commerce—closer in this sense to the gold reserves in the vaults of the Banque de France than to what we mean by collections.

A self-justifying discourse quickly follows the emergence of collections in the hands of art lovers (Vasari). During the Enlightenment, history and criticism are sublimated into aesthetic philosophy, a development contemporary with the creation of the first great national museums.

The “irregulars of art” themselves do not escape this still-valid process of ratification. Art Brut acquired a permanent home of exhibition at the Foyer de l’Art Brut in Paris and a kind of autonomous academy called *Compagnie* in the early 1960s, the very moment that Dubuffet was producing its theoretical legitimacy in his beautiful *Écrits*. Thus nonculture was no longer a tributary to asphyxiating culture, but only by becoming in its turn a culture to which tribute must be paid. The process by which works become Art is torture for “anartists.”

The transition from idol to work of art parallels the transition from manuscript to printing between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Calvinist iconoclasm develops in Gutenberg’s wake and represents the second *querelle des images* in the history of Christian Europe. Erected to the *sola scriptura*, that is, to the all-symbolic by the propagation of the book, the Reformation denounced the magical and indexical perversion of Christian imagery (which in statues of painted wood had attained in the Germanic air a dazzling degree of illusionism by the beginning of the sixteenth century). We must worship God and not His image, was the message Luther hammered home, taking up the thread of Tertullian’s charge that pagans took stones for their gods. Erasmus had already condemned the pagan idolatry hidden in the art of the Church, and Alfonso de Valdés, secretary to Charles V and a good Catholic, recognized that the cult of images of the Saints and the Holy Virgin diverts from Jesus Christ the love that we should invest in Him alone. The Counter-Reformation revived the image, pared it down, and inflated it (thus Protes-

10. See Krzysztof Pomian, *Collectionneurs, amateurs et curieux: Paris-Venise, XVIe-XVIIIe siècle* (Paris, 1987).

tantism finally reinforced what it had hoped to weaken), but by turning to a less perilous regime, to a representational function for the visible rather than a charismatic or cathartic one. Between the *icon* and the *painting* the image changed its sign. From an apparition it became an appearance. Once the subject, it became no more than an object. The visual refitting of the Catholic world after the Council of Trent came about with more images but a lesser image than theretofore—as if the Reformation had at least obtained that *diminutio capitis*. The apparent rise to power of the artist as individual that ostensibly marks the arrival of the era of art—note, after the “divine Michelangelo,” the ennoblement of Titian by Charles V—has as its inverse a reduction of ontological power, a collapse in the real presence of his creations. Beauty is failed—even rejected—magic. As the modern museum is the trash can of culturedegradable beliefs, so art is what is left to the faithful once their sacred images can no longer save them.

To all appearances the image never did so well as during the Renaissance. It is everywhere: in churches, in palaces, and even in the street, since people went so far as to paint the facades of buildings, “transferring to the home the authority of plastic forms” (Chastel). The age of art, especially in Italy, its metropolis, went so far as to treat architecture as a medium for images (today the architect exploits the painter, when he is not making their shared space impossible for him). The humanistic image freed itself from the cult and produced its own culture. It passed from the sacral to the laic, from the communitarian to the individual; though still guaranteed by the first Revelation, its value was no longer indexed to the scale of divine powers.

Having appeared with writing, idolatry thus faded away with printing, which, as Henri-Jean Martin notes, effaced “a certain form of the language of images.”¹¹ The xylographic pamphlet disappeared around 1470 in the face of the typographic book. The printing boom came about at the expense of illustrated, richly colored books illuminated with allegorical figures. Narrative images, narratives in images such as stained-glass windows, tapestries (think of the Angers Apocalypse, our first comic strip), lintels, and frescoes disappeared or receded into the background. Medieval Europe was much more a civilization of the image than is our own visual age, and the seventeenth century papered over it with its gray pages. Until the appearance of lithography in the nineteenth century, the book of the nobleman does not admit a portrait of the author (Boileau does not illustrate his *Art poétique*). Socially the image thus settles to the bottom. It is a rule: if the idol is egalitarian, even collectivist, the image of art appears in societies with pronounced social distinctions.

Gutenberg permitted this revolutionary transition from the woodcut to the print, that great proliferator without which art would not have

11. Henri-Jean Martin, *Histoire et pouvoirs de l'écrit* (Paris, 1988), p. 218.

conquered the West in a half century. From the fourteenth century, in order to become better known abroad and to stimulate the sale of their works, artists had engravings made of their paintings (Mantegna, Dürer, and Rubens founded dispensaries of engravings). Outside of China, where printing on paper is as old as writing itself, the woodcut is the earlier form and, from the first decade of the fifteenth century, even signed. Xylography prospered toward the end of the Middle Ages, answering to its passion for pious imagery—for memorizing the sermons of mendicant friars, for illustrating Bibles, for teaching litanies and prayers. Line engraving on copper that made use of the cylindrical press emerged as did printing from the artisanal work in metals, silver, and gold of which Germanic peoples were the masters. The first anonymous masters of the burin—the Master E. S., for example—were Rhenish. Line engraving dethroned the woodcut, the principal medium of propaganda and agitation in the preceding era.

A driving force behind the illustration and, through it, of the descriptive sciences (cosmography, medicine, botany), printing created the first denominator in metal after money, and a great promoter of Germanic culture—Dürer and Lucas van Leyden. Engraving came from the North because publishing came from the North, and the career of the print traces that of the printed book. Dürer, an enthusiast of all the sciences, devoted a book to the proportions of letters, recreated characters, and commented on each letter in his alphabet. A book circulates, can be exported, bought, and sold, much more easily than a painting; it is a vehicle of influences, an accelerator of borrowings, a mediator of styles, an instigator of plagiarism. The virus of the visual circulated in the same way, and print culture cannot be opposed to the culture of the image; the two in the beginning reinforced one another. Engraving put the iconophobic North in contact with the South, and the iconophilic South with the Northern school. Northern Europe preferred books, the South preferred paintings (especially after the Council of Trent). Protestant primacy, Catholic priority. Protestant pessimism of the letter alone, worldly optimism confiding in the dynamics of images. The debate tore at a Christianity already divided between Melanchthon and Loyola as the medieval Church had been divided between Cistercian asceticism and Clunian luxury, between the image that makes us forget God and the image that reminds the illiterate of His existence, between the appeal of the senses and the defense of a singular meaning [*Sens*]. Convulsive, bloody indecision: Savonarola burned the “vanities” of Florence before being burned himself. Is it necessary to approach paganism in order to save the visible at the risk of grace, or else to renounce the suspect magnetism of images in order to cultivate belles lettres and the purity of the Holy Spirit? The latter was the choice of the humanists, and Erasmus, who did not condemn the image, did not take it very seriously either. Northern European humanism treated art haughtily. Linked as it was to the book,

engraving was in their eyes an acceptable compromise, nothing more. And yet engraving reconnected Antwerp, Basel, and Fontainebleau to Italy, the country of the arts, expanded the map of cross-fertilization, and integrated the grotesque, the decorative detail, and the architectural plan into the world of noble forms. Well before photography, printing permitted the first imaginary museum in Europe. It would simply be made worldwide by photographic representation. It has since been miniaturized by the numerical revolution.

The idol showed what *a gaze without a subject* [*un regard sans sujet*] could be. With the visual, we will see what *a vision without a gaze* [*une vision sans regard*] is. The era of art placed *a subject behind the gaze*: a human being. This revolution bears the name of Euclidean perspective.¹² It took place in Tuscany, at Florence, Assisi, and Mantua, in the first half of the fifteenth century. The names Giotto, Mantegna, Piero della Francesca, Masaccio, and Uccello personify this crucial turning point, which is a return. Until this time the idol "emitted" toward the spectator; it had the initiative. Humanity benefitted from its virtues under certain conditions but was not their source. It was seen, not seeing.

When a Greek or Roman citizen, one of the faithful in Byzantium or medieval Europe, lifted his eyes to the sacred or divine image, he could only lower them again. For it is the eye of the Lord that rests upon him. Thus he makes the sign of the cross and bends his head. No one can appropriate an idol that shines through him. It has neither author nor owner but perfect autonomy. A sign from on high has no human signature. To develop it is still to receive it because it is God who sent it. The invention of geometric perspective breaks this spell of humility. It makes the Western eye proud, above all of its perspicacity. *Perspicere* means to see clearly and to the bottom of things. The painstaking discovery of the architects Brunelleschi and Alberti deserves its name because it allows mysteries, the twofold depths of the visible, to be illuminated and thus voided through a purely human light.

Certainly all the other visual cultures of the world had their way of transposing space onto a flat surface. The Egyptians had perspective in plan; Hindus, radiating perspective; the Chinese and Japanese, bird's-eye perspective; and the Byzantines themselves, inverted perspective. The traditional icon is said to be without depth. It is true that Byzantium and to a lesser degree the Latin West inherited Plotinian interdicts belonging to the spiritualist physics of the last Greek philosophers. Plotinus rejected depth because it is matter, like space and shadow. Placing all figures in the foreground, the *only ground*, favors the intellectual vision of the Idea, the divine in the image.¹³ A third dimension is preserved, how-

12. See Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, trans. Christopher S. Wood (New York, 1991).

13. In the optics of that period, which held that vision does not occur on the retina but on the object viewed at the point of contact between a ray of light emitted by the eye and

ever. Not in *trompe l'oeil* but in reality. It is not internal to the painted surface but rather located between the icon and the beholding eye. It is the distance that rays of light carrying the divine energy traverse to reach the faithful. The vanishing point is the eye of the spectator.

But none of these codes of perspective left their mark outside of the cultural perimeters from which they came, whereas Western perspective has subordinated all others to itself. It created the modern method for the graphic representation of space by relying on a system of geometrical figuration whose intelligibility is universal. The unitary space of the Renaissance unified the real world. Introduced by the concept of the infinite, which controlled that of the continuous, it broke down the closed and cloistered, qualitative and fragmented, universes that until that time had governed representation. It replaces obsessive observation of detail with a homogenous and global system in which intelligible space neutralizes the recesses and crannies that are available to the senses. The marriage of the eye and mathematical logic had the effect of opening physical and not merely mythological or psychological nature to the gaze. *Perspectiva artificialis* revealed the earth to us by liberating us from the gods. It permitted our exodus from the eternal—the equivalent of the Jewish people's exodus from Egypt—by confronting us with the banality of things. The metaphysical reversal of the poles of the universe was in the first place an optical event, and a revolution of the gaze has always preceded Western scientific and political revolutions. Painters formulated the laws of perspective more than a century before mathematicians took them into account or descriptive geometry clarified their operations. The simultaneous appearance of perspective and art does not coincide at random with the birth of a society of humanists outside of clerical tutelage. This laicization had two consequences that were beneficial to the history of art: the constitution of an aesthetic field independent of theology by way of a profane history of artists and styles (Guiberti, Alberti, and so on), and the creation of collections of profane antiquities (medals, manuscripts, coins, statues) outside of places of worship. Art and humanism were contemporaries because their postulates were interdependent.

We will not take up here the debate as to whether this breakthrough marked the culmination of a slow approximation to objective reality finally rendered truthfully that led to the faithful and direct apprehension of absolute space, or was instead a symbolic form among a hundred other possible ones, a subjective method and code that were scientifically illegitimate but culturally pertinent in their relation to a given state of civilization. Panofsky and his school seem to have been vindicated: it is a matter

exterior illumination, proper perspective is the inverse of ours: the farther away an object is, the larger it is. See André Grabar, "Plotin et les origines de l'esthétique médiévale," *Cahiers d'archéologie*, no. 1 (1945): 15–34.

of stylization, not of imitation. On the world's stage (theater design plays a role in the invention of perspective) humanity upstages God. As at the vanishing point in the spacial plane of a painting, here humanity is lead actor and director in its little theatrical cube. The single vanishing point at the center of the stage wall or curtain is situated along the axis of the immobile and unique, monocular and solitary point of view of the ego-centric spectator before whom space unfolds as if new. Even if few paintings followed the theoretical model to the letter, the diminution of proportions from a central point is not without consequences. The construction of perspective makes a hero of the constructor who is lucid enough to know the rules of space and active enough to apply them. Subjectivizing the gaze no doubt had its price: the real was reduced to the perceived. This was the beginning of the end of the transfiguring gaze. Optics threw the mystical transcendence of divine motive over visible motif into crisis. When spacial extension was made geometrical by squaring the theatrical stage, the external world was transformed into an assemblage of volumes and surfaces relieved forever of their magical opacities. The essence of the visible was no longer the invisible but a system of lines and points. As though the experimental analysis of three dimensions could only work to the detriment of spirituality, as though what was gained in playing space was lost in revelatory value. The end of epiphanies marked the debut of *trompe l'oeil*.

A central spectator is no longer a potential possession but the effective owner of a work, a master of numbers and machines. The *private* collector of the marvels of nature. The painting humanizes but it also privatizes. The reign of creative individuality will be more elitist, more closed socially. The work of art comes from the mind of the author, which addresses *one* connoisseur. The idol, coming from elsewhere, addresses *all* creatures. At the beginning of era one, there was only one artist, God. At the end of era two there will be only one god, the artist.

Put more soberly, we move from the one to the other when the formal qualities of the image separated from its informative and transfigurative message reveal to a new gaze the value of the rendered independent of value to be rendered, when the commissioner of a painting or a fresco no longer wants a nativity or a crucifixion but a Bellini or a Raphael. For the artist is born at the same moment as the author, the latter a late, typographical creation of the flyleaf of the printed book. Long before the notion of intellectual property, that of intellectual and artistic *personality* followed from the new practices of appropriating mental products. Isabelle of Este wrote in 1501 of Leonardo that "if he would consent to undertake a painting for our apartments, we would leave to him the choice of subject and time." In France the post of appraiser for the state, a ministerial office, was established by a royal edict of Henri II in 1556. We have passed from imagery to art when the painter no longer executes an order or a program as the artisan does and when the value

of his work no longer depends on the materials he uses (so many ounces of lapis lazuli or of gold) or on the number of people he represents—all of which was stipulated in medieval contracts. When the artist puts a freely composed work of art on the market after it is made, and when its price is no longer fixed by a preexisting contract but by the vagaries of supply and demand, as was done first in Holland by Rembrandt and his associates. With the portrait boom, this noble work is no longer incompatible with the face of everyman; it is no longer limited to the features of a prince or of a donor on his retable.

Eras are divided into periods and are subdivided into epochs. If this convention applies to the Quaternary period in geology or to the Upper Paleolithic period in prehistory, it will not be considered inapplicable to the last five hundred years, where it is a good bet that Piero della Francesca and Pablo Picasso cannot be classified under the same terms.

A closer look at the era of art would no doubt distinguish a clerical and curial period from roughly 1450 to 1550 in which the painter is no longer a craftsman but remains a domestic servant; a period of princely patronage from 1550 to 1650 with the rise of the court painter; a monarchical and academic period from 1650 to 1750 with officially designated artists (1648: foundation of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture); and after 1750 a bourgeois and merchant period with its competitions for prizes at a time when printing receives new impetus. It is around this time that alongside the ailing Académie is established that complex constellation of agents that retains its hold throughout the nineteenth century: the art merchant, the gallery, the critic, and the exhibition. In France in 1748 a special jury is appointed to decide on the works to be shown at the Salon (inaugurated in 1667 by Colbert and Le Brun). The Salon gives rise to the art critic, who is part of a system with the periodical, the catalogue (the first appeared in Holland in 1661), and the merchant or gallery with a clientele of varied tastes. This differentiation or privatization of taste goes hand in hand with the breakup of the hierarchy of genres established during the seventeenth century by the Académie Royale: history painting at the top, then the portrait, then the landscape, paintings of animals, and, at the bottom, the still life. That is the price that must be paid for free professional practice once the monopoly of the academy has been breached.¹⁴

Our artist has thus worked successively for religious communities; in the courts of princes (Anjou, Bourgogne, Berry, and so on); for the king, his court, and his academy; for art lovers, critics, and salons; and, finally, in our entrepreneurial epoch, for corporations, the media, and muse-

14. See Jeanne Laurent, *Arts et pouvoirs en France de 1793 à 1981: Histoire d'une démission artistique* (Saint-Etienne, 1982), and Raymonde Moulin, *Le Marché de la peinture en France* (Paris, 1967).

ums. This polarization is not merely sociological or external. The promoter of aesthetic operations for an epoch regulates the nature of the works produced, if in former times only by hierarchically ordering the relative value of the genres. Whoever must be in the good graces of another must respond to his needs, and a prelate, a lord, a monarch, a man of taste, and a great industrialist will not make the same demands. The painting of sacred subjects declined with the temporal power of the Church; the grand style of historical and mythological painting with absolute monarchy; portraiture and genre painting with the leisured bourgeoisie. For whom? answers the question, For what purpose? If you will allow me to systematize, in each epoch the government of art belongs to a central mediating group, that is, the social group that gives a certain moment of Western history its spirit and style because it administers what is sacred to it. The Church administered God and salvation; princely courts, power and glory; the bourgeoisies, the nation and progress; multinational corporations, profit and growth. The bearer of unifying values, that is to say, of the social sacred, is also the one who can best tap economic surplus. The principal collector of surplus value collects the most valorizing images. Being the one who commissions, buys, and promotes them, he is also naturally the judge of elegancies and the index of values. Whoever pays the piper gets to call the tune.